



June 26, 2019

MELISSA McKINLAY

**County Commissioner
District 6**

Palm Beach County
Board of County Commissioners



Governmental Center
301 North Olive Avenue, 12th Floor
West Palm Beach, FL 33401

Telephone: (561) 355-2206
Facsimile: (561) 355-4366

mmckinlay@pbcgov.org



Glades Office Complex
2976 State Road #15
Belle Glade, FL 33430

Telephone: (561) 996-4814
Facsimile: (561) 992-1038



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URGENT

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary, United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Re: USDA Rural Housing – Okeechobee Center, Belle Glade, FL

Dear Secretary Perdue:

I am writing you this evening with an urgent matter. It has come to my attention that a young family residing at 81 Everglades Street in Belle Glade, Florida – a location under the jurisdiction of the Belle Glade Housing Authority on behalf of the USDA Rural Housing Program – is living in what can only be described as hell.

██████████ and his family have been living at this address for just over a year. He lives here with his wife, twin 6-yr old daughters and his 1-yr old son. Since moving to this home, the children's health has been seriously jeopardized. Here is a summary of the situation:

- **The home is covered in mold.**
- **The home is infested with rats and other rodents.**
- **The home is infested with cockroaches.**
- **The baby's crib has been infested with those cockroaches.**
- **The baby and young girls are chewed on by rats.**
- **The baby has an infestation of cockroaches in his ear canal.**
- **The baby and young girls are being bitten by cockroaches and rats.**
- **The baby boy has been hospitalized due to breathing issues, which his pediatrician suspects is caused by the environmental conditions inside the home.**
- **The baby boy has been diagnosed with asthma and has had recurrent ear infections**

The family continues to report these issues to the complex management and requested remediation. Management responded with pest control

services, which continues to result in an increase in cockroach infestation. Most recently, Management also responded with rat poison to eliminate the rats and rodents. According to the mother, the cockroaches again increased; however, she reports the rats “seemed to pile against a corner and move slowly now to where the family is able to capture and remove them.”

In regards to the mold, Management shared the family is responsible for removing the mold in order for Management to repaint the unit. Apparently, the lease agreements include a provision making it the tenant’s responsibility to cure mold issues. Management will provide services at a cost of \$200.00 per request, which the family cannot afford.

In February 2017, I alerted Senator Marco Rubio and (former) Senator Bill Nelson to my concerns about the condition of these USDA units in the Belle Glade Community. I also extended an invitation for you and Secretary Carson to come tour the area to see the condition of both the USDA and HUD units.

Also in February 2017, I spoke with Alan Sullivan at the Belle Glade Housing Authority and was told by him that he had no concerns about the condition of the units and actually stated the units were in good condition. And, with 63 low income agricultural families on the waiting list, expressed no concern about the lack of units for those families.

We have two complexes under USDA control in the Glades Communities – Okeechobee and Osceola. The complexes encompass 714 units across 455 buildings. Nearly half of all buildings were built before 1968. The last time these complexes saw any new construction was 1997, when 14 units were added. Maintenance has been minimal at best.

My neighboring county, Hendry County, also has USDA Farmworker Housing (51 units with a 204-person capacity). The condition of these units is also questionable.

My reason for writing you today is three-fold:

1. I need immediate assistance for the family I identified above and the other families living at the Okeechobee Complex
2. I am requesting a site visit by you and/or your staff, along with the impacted Members of Congress, of the USDA Housing in Palm Beach and Hendry Counties
3. I am requesting that USDA Rural Housing Administration do a complete inventory of the housing units under their jurisdiction in Florida including renovation or reconstruction of units in deplorable condition, maintenance repairs, and an overhaul of tenant leases so that items like mold are Management’s responsibility

Our low-income, hardworking farmworker families deserve the same thing all families in our country deserve – a safe, healthy environment in which to live and raise their families. I hope the description of the baby boy I described above made you as nauseas as it made me. Something must be done IMMEDIATELY. Imagine if these were your grandchildren.

I look forward to hearing from your office as soon as possible.

Sincerely,



Melissa McKinlay
Commissioner, District 6
Palm Beach County, Florida

Attachments: Photos from tenants, Letter to Senator Rubio, Inventory of Belle Glade Housing Authority

cc:

The Honorable Bruce Lammers
Administrator for Rural Housing Service
United States Department of Agriculture, Rm 5014, STOP 0701
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

The Honorable Mario Diaz-Balart
United States House of Representatives
404 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Alcee Hastings
United States House of Representatives
2353 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Marco Rubio
United States Senate
284 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Rick Scott
United States Senate
716 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510